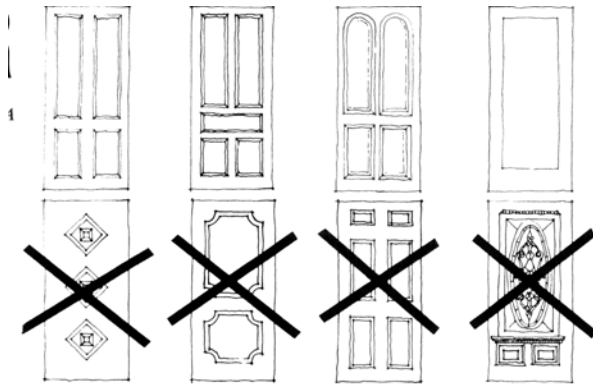


# Guidelines

## WHEN A DOOR IS MORE THAN A DOOR

By Judith M. Capen AIA  
and Robert A Weinstein AIA



The issue of "entrance": arriving at a building and *knowing* you have arrived; the transcendence of "door" and creation of an event of arrival goes far beyond just the door one chooses. However, having said that and with the constraints of space, we will discuss just one component of entrance: door.

One of the frequent preservation challenges for us here on Capitol Hill is the replacement of inappropriate doors. Referring to the "Ten Commandments" of the Guidelines of the Secretary of the Interior, and considering the difficulty of finding good replacement doors, we can't imagine a situation in which we would counsel replacing an original exterior door. Instead, please repair. There are, however, numerous cases of replacement doors on the Hill which are both inappropriate and deteriorating. These doors are excellent candidates for replacement with more appropriate doors.

The first step in this process is to find a good door. The second step is to get a building permit. The Historic Preservation Office [202/442-8800; 801 North Capitol Street, NE] is happy to offer suggestions

The first four doors illustrated above are perfectly acceptable. The four- and five-panel doors are okay as they are, and even better with moldings applied to create the look of raised or bolelection moldings. The third door, the four panel with the arched tops, is an extremely common original door; this, with the four- and five-panel doors, is one of the good alternatives available from House of Doors, albeit expensive.

The bottom illustrations are of inappropriate doors. The first two refugees from the 1950 suburbs should need no comment. But, amazingly, doors like these are still being installed on our late Victorian houses. Please don't. The third, ubiquitous six-panel, or "cross and Bible" door is a common, but often inappropriate, replacement door. Consider replacing your six-panel door with one of the appropriate designs. The final door illustrated is a "Victorian" design which is, nonetheless, not appropriate for Capitol Hill. We have yet to see a single original door on the Hill like this one.

and work with you on door selection when you go in for your permit. Remember: Do not buy a door until after your choice has been approved by the Historic Preservation Office. Look at the other houses grouped with yours or similar to yours, even if not adjacent, to discover original doors. The original doors often had a piece of molding called 'bolelection' which projects from the primary surface of the door. Thus, these doors have a thicker, more robust look

than replacement doors with recessed panels or, worse, the flat doors with moldings glued on the surface. Also, the ubiquitous six-panel or "cross and Bible" doors are typically inappropriate replacement doors.

(Another aside: if the original opening size for your front door was reduced when an inappropriate door was installed, please return the opening to its original size.)

Probably one of the easiest and most economical door solutions is the full glass door. These, either single or double leaf, were frequently used on Capitol Hill buildings and are easily available today. They are not terribly expensive, even as custom doors for our sometimes oddly sized openings.

Another easy door solution is to buy one of several appropriate door designs available from the House of Doors in Alexandria or other suppliers. Unfortunately, these doors are expensive. However, since they are mahogany and custom-made they should last your lifetime and will be made to fit whatever door opening you have.

Somewhere between the most and least expensive alternatives is getting a custom door in the typical style of four panels with arched top panels, but in pine instead of mahogany. Other acceptable alternatives include a simple four-panel door (available from many lumberyards, even in non-standard sizes from Smoot Lumber in Alexandria). A five-panel door would also be okay, but they are not commonly available.

While a simple four- or five-panel door would be acceptable as is, it is not too difficult to add wood molding around the panels to create the look of bolection molding.

Several door and millwork companies now manufacture charming doors with lots of detail and oval etched or decorated glass panels. While these Victorian style doors *are* found in other neighborhoods, they are not found on Capitol Hill and so represent an "alteration with no historical base" warned against in the Secretary of the Inte-

rior's Standards. The colonial-style doors with fan-shaped glass at the top are also inappropriate.

While thinking about your front door, you might also think about its accoutrements. If you are thinking about a return to the mail slot, look around at the original ones: You'll notice they are rectangular with half circle ends. Various hardware stores (we have found them at Union Hardware) have mail slots with this racetrack shape and an interior flap.

House numbers are another small but important detail. Looking around, you will notice that virtually every one of our houses has a glass transom over the front door and has or had its house number there in gold. Any competent sign painter will paint your house numbers in gold on your transom. Finally, the type face is important: you want a serif type face with a black shadow.

The last of the accoutrements is the doorbell. Certainly, the plastic, suburban, illuminated type is not historic. We would counsel the simplest approach: a button on a plate. ♦

---

*This article first appeared in the Capitol Hill Restoration Society News in 1989. For more information about doors, entrances, and Capitol Hill style, consult the 12-page CHRS Guidelines: "Entrance—When a Door is More Than a Door" and "Building Styles in the Capitol Hill Historic District," available from CHRS, 543-0425.*

*Call the D.C. Historic Preservation Office, 442-8800, for more information on selecting the right door for your house and for information on the permit process. You should get a permit before you buy a door!*